



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# **Driftless Area**

## *National Wildlife Refuge*

### **Final Environmental Impact Statement and Comprehensive Conservation Plan**

**Project Update**

*February 2006*

## **Final Environmental Impact Statement and Comprehensive Conservation Plan Released**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has finalized the integrated Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) for Driftless Area National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in Iowa. We are grateful to all of the neighbors, non-government organizations, local officials and many interested citizens who contributed to this planning effort over the course of 3 years.

The comprehensive conservation plan outlines how the Refuge will fulfill its legal purpose and contribute to the National Wildlife Refuge System's wildlife, habitat, and public use goals. The plan articulates management goals for the next 15 years and specifies the objectives and strategies needed to accomplish these goals. While the planned future condition is long term, we anticipate that the plan will be updated every 5 to 10 years based on information gained through monitoring habitat and wildlife, as well as recreational usage.

The Final EIS and CCP are available on the planning website for Driftless Area NWR:  
<http://www.fws.gov/midwest/planning/DriftlessArea>

## **About the Refuge**

Driftless Area NWR is truly unique. It was established in 1989 to conserve threatened and endangered species that depend on a rare and fragile habitat type called "algific talus slopes," or cold air slopes. These are areas where cold underground air seeps onto slopes to provide a constant cold microenvironment. This habitat harbors species, some



of which date from the Ice Age, that require a cold environment. Specific species that depend on this habitat and which the Refuge works to conserve include the endangered Iowa Pleistocene snail and threatened Northern monkshood.

Today the Refuge consists of nine scattered tracts or 'units' totaling 781 acres of upland hardwood forest, grassland, stream, and riparian habitats.



The current management practice is to protect endangered species habitat, restore other habitats to presettlement vegetation when possible, and control invasive species. Prescribed burning is used in habitat management. Two Refuge units are open for hunting, fishing, and wildlife observation and photography. Presentations and tours are given as requested and staff time allows. The Refuge is managed under the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife Refuge Complex, which includes three Refuges. The Refuge office is co-located with the McGregor District of Upper Mississippi River NWFR. One full-time Refuge Operations Specialist is assigned to the Refuge.

## **Who We Are and What We Do**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the primary federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. Our specific responsibilities include enforcing federal wildlife laws, managing migratory bird populations, restoring nationally significant fisheries, administering the Endangered Species Act, and restoring wildlife habitat such as wetlands.

The Service's role also includes managing the National Wildlife Refuge System, a network of more than 540 national wildlife refuges encompassing more than 93 million acres of public land and water.

## **The Planning Process**

Work on the Driftless Area NWR Draft EIS and CCP began in 2002. One of the first steps in the planning process was to invite public comment on what issues environmental planning should consider. Meetings were held in the fall of 2002 in Dubuque, Elkader, and Lansing, Iowa, and Prairie

du Chien, Wisconsin. A "Manager for a Day" workshop was held in February 2003 in Elkader, Iowa, to develop alternatives to the issues raised by the public and Refuge staff.

The Draft EIS and CCP was released for public review and comment in May 2005. Approximately 156 copies of a summary and 87 copies of the full Draft EIS were mailed based on the distribution list and upon request. A letter inviting comment was also sent along with the summary to 81 landowners who adjoin Refuge lands or who have species listed under the Endangered Species Act occurring on their land. Each Draft EIS summary contained information on how to obtain a copy of the full Draft EIS.

The Service made the Draft EIS available for a 60-day public review period that began May 18 and ended July 22, 2005. During this review period, four public meetings were held in Decorah, Elkader, and Peosta, Iowa and LaFarge, Wisconsin. Thirty-three people attended. In addition to recording comments at the public meetings, the Service received 12 comment letters or e-mails during the public review period.

Based on the comments that were received, some small revisions and improvements were made to the Draft EIS and CCP. The comments that we received and our responses to them are presented in detail in Chapter 7 of the EIS and CCP. The draft and final documents are essentially the same except for the improvements suggested by reviewers. We appreciate the time and thought that reviewers contributed throughout the planning process.





## Where You Can Find the Final EIS and CCP

The Final EIS and CCP is available online at: <http://www.fws.gov/midwest/planning/DriftlessArea>. Copies are also available in libraries in communities surrounding the Refuge. To request a copy, call the Refuge at 563/873-3423 or write to the Refuge at:

Driftless Area National Wildlife Refuge  
401 Business Highway 18N  
P.O. Box 460  
McGregor, IA 52157

## Next Steps

After the Final EIS and CCP have been available for at least 30 days, the Regional Director will issue a document called a "Record of Decision." The Record of Decision will officially document the choice of the management alternative and resulting CCP. We will then assemble a stand-alone CCP from the Final EIS and CCP. The stand-alone CCP will be the working document for the Refuge. It will be available for others, as well.

## Planned Refuge Program Highlights

### Refuge Vision

The Refuge is beautiful, healthy, and supports and conserves native and rare wildlife and plants for current and future generations.

### Refuge Goals

*Habitat:* Conserve endangered species habitat and contribute to migratory bird and other wildlife habitats within a larger landscape.

*Species Management:* Manage and protect endangered species, other trust species, and species of management interest based on sound science through identification and understanding of algific slope communities and associated habitats.

*Visitor Services:* Visitors understand and appreciate the role of the Refuge in protecting endangered species.

### Management Direction

*Synopsis:* Briefly, our intention over the life of the CCP is to meet delisting criteria for the Iowa Pleistocene snail and to contribute to the recovery goals for Northern



monkshood and Leedy's roseroot. To accomplish this, we will conserve approximately 2,200 more acres of endangered species habitat than we did in 2004, either through acquiring land from willing sellers or working with landowners on conservation projects.

We will add one biologist position to the Driftless Area NWR staff. We will improve our visitor services facilities by constructing a wildlife observation trail on the Howard Creek unit and developing an interpretive display. We will increase our environmental education efforts.

*Background:* This endangered species habitat cannot be restored once it has been lost, and the species are difficult to reintroduce. With this in mind, permanent protection of habitat is the primary recovery goal for the Iowa Pleistocene snail and Northern monkshood. As well as meeting recovery goals, protection of additional algific slopes or moderate cliffs would meet the Service's goals of conserving biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health. Refuge land protection will meet key recovery goals for these species and may prevent future listing of other land snail and plant species.

Permanent conservation of algific talus slopes goes beyond protection of the slope itself from physical disturbance. New information and threats increase the need for active management to meet multiple recovery goals for delisting. Over the next 15 years, the Service will focus limited Refuge resources on taking care of existing Refuge habitats as well as adding lands for endangered species protection.

As funding permits and as people decide they want to sell land, the Service will acquire new Refuge lands. While the total approved acquisition area for the Refuge will be 6,000 acres in 22 counties (four states), we expect to acquire 2,275 acres over the 15-year life of the CCP. Expansion into

additional counties will allow potential acquisition and protection of large populations, populations across the species' ranges, and protection of the majority of populations.

*Habitat:* We intend to increase inspection of Refuge units. In addition, the Refuge will share a law enforcement officer with the McGregor District of Upper Mississippi River NWFR. We will increase efforts to control invasive species, particularly garlic mustard. We will continue work to monitor Iowa Pleistocene snail and Northern monkshood populations. To help us make decisions on restoration of adjacent habitat, we will increase efforts to study algific slopes, including determining the impacts of shade. We will add one biologist position to the Driftless Area NWR staff. We will complete conservation site plans for potential acquisition areas. To meet delisting criteria of the Iowa Pleistocene snail and to contribute to recovery goals for Northern monkshood and Leedy's roseroot, we will conserve approximately 2,200 more acres of endangered species habitat than we did in 2004, either by acquiring land from willing sellers or through partnership efforts. We will conserve 75 acres more than we did in 2004 to help preclude listing of glacial relict snail species of concern.

Over the next 15 years, 40 acres of grassland will be restored at the Howard Creek Unit. Forty-one acres of forest will be reestablished at the Fern Ridge unit, 7 acres will be restored at the Howard Creek unit, and 68 acres will be restored at the Pine Creek unit. We will develop a management plan for all other forest lands to describe how forests will provide habitat for migratory birds and other wildlife. As we acquire new land, habitat management plans will be prepared.

*Species Management:* We will complete surveys for new algific talus slopes and associated species so that we better

understand these unique communities. We will update recovery plans for the Iowa Pleistocene snail and Northern monkshood, and we will initiate study of the location and function of sinkholes. We will complete an evaluation of deer populations and their impacts on the Refuge.

*Visitor Services:* We will construct a wildlife observation trail on the Howard Creek unit. Although space is limited, we will continue to share office and Visitor Center space with the McGregor District. A new professionally developed interpretive display will be assembled and we will increase environmental education efforts. The Refuge will share an interpretive park ranger with McGregor District. In an effort to better understand visitor use on the Refuge, we will measure threshold visitor use levels. We will complete a Visitor Services Plan.



## Into the Future

Throughout the planning process, many people have contributed time and ideas to make the Driftless Area NWR EIS and CCP a better document. We are grateful to everyone who cared enough about the Refuge and its future to participate in this planning effort.

To succeed, a refuge management plan has to adapt to nature's everchanging conditions. Although the plan is complete, we expect to revise it every 5 to 10 years in response to conditions that could not be anticipated in the planning process. We will continue to welcome your thoughts on Refuge management.

Driftless Area NWR conserves very rare habitat and, with it, very rare species of wildlife. We hope that you will continue to care about and participate in this conservation effort.